

Israel May Resettle Black Hebrew Cult

Panel Could Recommend Commune,
Not Deportation, for Americans

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DIMONA, Israel—A cult of U.S. Blacks—whom police and some of their neighbors would like to see deported—probably will be given their own farming settlement instead, officials here say.

An investigating committee of the Israeli Knesset (parliament) has been looking into the status and future of the group known as the Black Hebrews of Dimona. Its recommendations are soon to be made public.

Sources say the committee has turned down the police recommendation and instead will recommend moving the Americans out of Dimona and nearby towns and into a desert settlement in southern Israel.

There are 1,000 of the Black Hebrews in this area, living communally with as many as 25 crowded into apartments designed for families of four or five. They all have been classified as illegal immigrants.

In the drab, windswept, newly built cities of southern Israel, the Americans strike an exotic, and, to some residents, a discordant note.

They wear costumes of their own design—turbans, capes, ponchos, tunics and flowing dresses of flamboyant colors.

They are polygamous and are married by what they call "divine rites" by priests appointed from within their own community.

They obey as dictates the orders of their leader, Ben Ami Carter, 39, whom they address as "Prince of Peace."

Carter has convinced them that they will live from 300 to 900 years. And will he, too? "Certainly," Carter said. "We are phasing out sickness and death."

This is a heady message to be absorbed by their neighbors in the so-called "development towns"—new cities populated mostly by less sophisticated Israelis descended from Jews of the Arab countries.

"I won't let my children play with their children," a Dimona bus driver said. "They're garbage. They don't pay taxes and they don't serve in the army."

Despite the prejudice some neighbors showed against them, they were polite, neat, industrious people. Jeannette, a young social worker in Dimona, said:

"I was able to buy an apartment next to them for half the price of any other place in Dimona because people

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Much hostility was caused by the way the cult lived.

didn't want to live next to them. They turned out to be ideal neighbors.

"I used to live next to a Moroccan family that swept all its dirt in front of my front door. These people not only sweep the hall but down the stairs and do the sidewalk, too."

But there was hostility directed at the Black Hebrews—most of it stemming from the conditions under which they lived—which Carter feels is the result of his community's rejection by an Israel that at first welcomed them.

"When the initial group arrived," Carter said, "they didn't accept us as Jews, but they gave us the benefits of new residents—apartments, work permits, health care. That was in 1969. Then in 1970, when more came in, and we were up to about 300 souls, they rejected our status, classified us as tourists, cancelled our work permits and wouldn't let us send our kids to school."

More and more of the cult members arrived from the United States, gaining admission as tourists and then simply staying after their visas expired. Denied additional apartments, they doubled up in those they had. They opened their own schools and developed their own simple health services.

They delivered babies themselves. And when the mothers screamed, the drummer from their jazz band tried to drown out the cries with drumbeats. Neighbors, not surprisingly, complained.

"Hostility began to set in," Carter said. "The neighbors were justified in many of their claims. We began to live communally, and then to turn inward, for survival. We stopped hosting our neighbors. We couldn't afford it. And they said we didn't want to assimilate."

Carter is a tall man, with the rich, mellow voice of the lay preacher he once was in Chicago. Wearing a costume reminiscent of a stage production of a Biblical drama, he speaks simply and persuasively until a key word triggers

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his speech into a style of ringing oratory.

In his appearance before the Knesset committee, he apparently persuaded it to reject a police panel's report recommending deportation of the Americans. Carter said that some people who spoke at the hearing compared his group to the Guyana cultists of Jonestown—a comparison that he finds unfair.

"We are not hiding out back in the jungle," he said. "People see us on the streets of Dimona and Arad and Mizpe Ramon every day. We have no secrets from anyone."

The Black Hebrews were one of a number of U.S. black groups that, reared on the Old Testament, shifted from a Christian to a Hebrew-oriented theology. Like others, the Black Hebrews consider themselves remnants of the original Biblical tribes of Israel.

After getting started in Chicago, the Carter "community" (his phrase) moved to Liberia—"guided by visions along the prophetic paths," Carter said, his tones slipping into oratory. The visions were his, although he said those of other members of the group were also considered.

In Liberia, two-thirds of the 400 members of the community gave up and returned to the United States during the 3½ years they spent "sojourning in the wilderness." Another vision then told Carter that it was time to start shifting his community to Israel.

An Israeli official said that this country accepted them at first, despite their meager qualifications as Hebrews, "because we didn't want to look racist and kick them out." It wasn't until the community began to number in the hundreds that Israeli officials sought to discourage the influx.

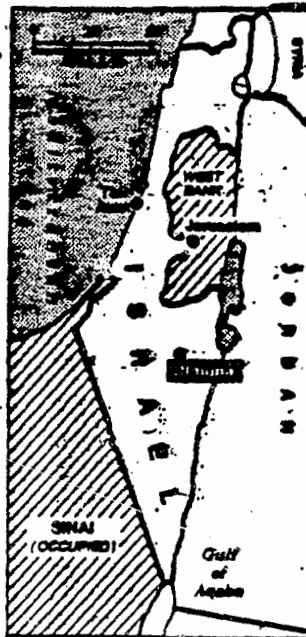
The group survived, ignoring Israeli laws under which they were illegally present, ignoring the rabbis who rejected their "beat version of Judaism." (They are vegetarians; the Sabbath, can have up to seven wives and claim that the Jews of the Bible were black.)

Carter is pleased with the prospect of the farming settlement. "We will grow organic vegetables," he said. Many desert cooperatives have produced rich crops under Israel's careful irrigation of the sandy soil.

The terms of the arrangement under which the Black Hebrews are expected to get the settlement—and legal status—will call for them to stop bringing any more members from the United States, it was learned. This doesn't bother Benjamin Carter.

He expects that the lessons of his people, who will achieve the longevity of centuries, he says, because of "living in harmony in the spirit and will of God," will spread to other Israelis.

"We don't deny them because of the color of their skin," he said. "By 2000, we pray that everyone in the Land of Israel will be a part of our community."



Ben Ami Carter, leader of the 1,000 Black Hebrews of Dimona.

Photo by Bob Chamberlin

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